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Barbara Radcliffe Rogers
BellaOnline's Luxury Travel Editor



Michael's on the Hill – Fine Dining in Stowe, VT

Vermont-grown ingredients transcend mere vegetables, meat and cheese in the inspired menus of Swiss-born Chef Michael Kloeti.

Piano music drifted into the frosty Vermont air as we opened the door to Michael's on the Hill, and as we stepped in we saw the piano and pianist, in the foyer. Not just a welcoming touch to arrivals, the piano's location made the music clearly audible to those in the dining rooms, but not intrusive on conversation at the nearest tables. We were seated at one of those, and enjoyed both the music and the ambient level that allowed us to converse easily.

Our table, like all tables at this classy restaurant a few miles south of Stowe, overlooked a snow-covered hillside; on summer evenings, the dining room overlooks the sunset. But it was neither the music nor the view that had brought us to Michael's on the Hill. It was what everyone had told us about the food.

No one had exaggerated in their raves. Our warm baguette arrived at table in a knotted napkin, accompanied by sweet butter, sea salt and black olives, each in its own small bowl made by a local potter. That night's "chef's taste" – the amuse bouche – was a perfect ham-and-cheddar beignet with a balsamic reduction. The combination of Vermont-cured bacon and Grafton smoked cheddar worked beautifully, a crispy browned exterior, moist light interior and the sweet acidity of the reduction as a perfect foil. We were charmed, even before we read the menu.

Our server was well informed and able to describe dishes – and their ingredients. We began with a mushroom strudel with watercress and hazelnuts, a flavorful balance of crisp, chewy and crunchy textures. The celeriac bisque, creamy, served at the right temperature and with tiny croutons and a sprinkling of truffle oil, brought this under-appreciated lumpy vegetable to transcendence, a dish well worthy of truffling.

The calamari salad, Michael's signature salad, arrived next, a mound of calamari rings fried to perfection, tender and neither greasy nor heavy, balanced by the slightly bitter touch of crisp frisée and the tang of capers and champagne vinaigrette. The accompanying watermelon radish brought my husband's notebook out of his pocket at first bite, and as I write this, there's a patch of them growing in our garden.

His entrée lobster was steamed to its most tender and flavorful point and its shell filled with a Meyer Lemon-mascarpone risotto so creamy it was almost a savory rice pudding. My venison was rare, sliced over spaetzle-like noodles, red cabbage and whole chestnuts, sauced in a rich, slightly sweet demi-glace.

This was a formidable amount of food, even for a winter's night after a day on Stowe's ski trails to develop our appetites. "If you just don't have room to try a dessert," our server suggested, "the Espresso Granité is the right finish for dinner." We took her word for it and ordered two (although after a lighter dinner I would have been really tempted by the Syrah-poached pear in a cranberry nage with gingerbread bark that was being served at the next table).

It was good advice. The granite arrived in a cup on a long rectangular dish, with a biscotti stick and a pair of candied kumquats, a fine finish indeed.

As much as we liked his cuisine, we liked Chef Michael Kloeti's philosophy – that the best ingredients come from as close to the table as possible. A strong supporter of sustainable agriculture in Vermont, Chef Michael is a member of the Vermont Fresh Network and Local First Vermont, working with nearby farms and food producers to use local organic ingredients. We liked the fact that he credits producers on the menu – Lazy Lady triple cream cheese, Mountain Foot Farm trout, Monument Farm Chantilly cream.

Michael's on the Hill is not an undiscovered gem. It is well-known in the region, so reservations (802-244-7476) are important. You'll find it in an 1820s farmhouse above Route 100, in Waterbury Center, halfway (5 minutes) between the I-89 exit and downtown Stowe, Vermont.